



European journal of American studies

10-2 | 2015

Summer 2015, including Special Issue: (Re)visioning
America in the Graphic Novel

The Monsters of Suburbia: *Black Hole* and the Mystique of the Pacific Northwest

Fiorenzo Iuliano



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10989>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.10989

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Fiorenzo Iuliano, « The Monsters of Suburbia: *Black Hole* and the Mystique of the Pacific Northwest », *European journal of American studies* [Online], 10-2 | 2015, document 7, Online since 14 August 2015, connection on 02 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10989> ; DOI : 10.4000/ejas.10989

This text was automatically generated on 2 May 2019.

Creative Commons License

The Monsters of Suburbia: Black Hole and the Mystique of the Pacific Northwest

Fiorenzo Iuliano

¹ Charles Burns's *Black Hole* was published in twelve issues between 1995 and 2004, and as a volume in 2005. As summarized in a review published in *The Washington Post*, *BlackHole*, set in the suburbs of Seattle, "covers the high school years of a group of kids who find themselves catching a venereal disease known as 'the teen plague.' After sex with an infected partner, they deform and mutate" (Schwarz). Those who are unable to hide the marks of the disease are condemned to live in the woods, leading a misrecognized existence outside human and social visibility. *Black Hole* is set in the 1970s, "after the fall of '60s idealism" (Appleford), as Burns himself states. The characters' clothes, along with references to musical icons of the time (David Bowie, Jim Morrison, and Jimi Hendrix) scattered through the novel, or to the use of drugs as a way to escape reality, are among the narrative elements that evoke the juvenile countercultures of the 1970s. In foregrounding the world of adolescents and young adults, however, Burns also traces a subtle parallel between two distinct phases of American history: his portrait of a group of teenagers from the 1970s, in fact, is echoed in 1990s Seattle, which, in the time span in which *Black Hole* was published, was almost unanimously identified as the new mecca of young counterculture.

² The setting of the whole story, thus, can be read as something more than a simple backdrop of the lives of its protagonists. Not only does Burns provide a portrait of Seattle back in the 1970s, probably trying to shed light on the differences and the continuities between the years in which *Black Hole* was published, in constructing *Black Hole* as a complex

and refined narrative and graphic pastiche, he turns to the Pacific Northwest of the United States as a collective fantasy, a well-defined and self-sufficient cultural landscape, with its own landmarks, “myths of foundation,” and territorial icons (both natural and urban). Thus, Burns unveils the most frequently recurring stereotypes related to this region of the US, trying to elucidate how the Pacific Northwest as a cultural myth fails to accommodate the condition of social marginality of distinct categories of people and groups.

³ There is a significant cultural, and specifically literary, tradition that has related the Pacific Northwest states (especially Washington and Oregon, and also, to a lesser degree, Idaho) to nature and wilderness, and has analyzed most of the artistic production of the Pacific Northwest and of the Northwest in general as the outcome of a close and idyllic symbiosis between the landscape and its inhabitants. *Black Hole*, on the contrary, positions itself among those texts that in the 1990s were reshaping Northwestern culture, questioning both the unproblematic relationship between urban culture and the landscape, and the positive character conventionally, and often uncritically, ascribed to nature. Burns’s attempt is all the more interesting, since in the 1990s the Pacific Northwest was gaining notoriety as the cultural landscape for that diffuse rebellion that characterized a whole generation, “Generation X,”ⁱ and that is perfectly evident in grunge music and some aspects of David Lynch’s TV series *Twin Peaks*. Both grunge and *Twin Peaks* played an important role in addressing some of the stereotypes commonly associated to the Northwest and to its evocative scenery, pointing to the crucial role that teenagers and young adults had in countering and deconstructing the image of peacefulness that was allegedly a defining character of that area of the United States. In its focus on the world of adolescents, *BlackHole* fits the more general frame of 1990s Pacific Northwestern counterculture, being a text that produces and shapes the identity of the place while simultaneously trying to represent it, and successfully contributes to a counter-narrative of Seattle and of Pacific Northwestern local identity.

⁴ In their readings of *Black Hole*, critics and reviewers have either interpreted the bodily mutations of the protagonists as a set of metaphors referring, for instance, to the AIDS epidemic (Zeigler; Raney), the school shootings in the US (Zeigler), and the generational clash (Schwartz); or tried to provide a psychoanalytic reading, defining *BlackHole* as “the most Freudian graphic novel you will every [sic] read” (Arnold). In particular, *BlackHole*’s plague has been read as a metaphor for AIDS in the reviews that looked at it as a representation of the way in which a sexually transmitted disease can stigmatize a category of people, causing their perpetual banning from society (Zeigler). All these readings imply that *Black Hole* is, actually, a sustained metaphor, and that, as such, it needs to be deciphered in order to retrieve its authentic meaning. Rather than as an assemblage of symbols that stand for something else, I will analyze *Black Hole* as a text that ultimately debunks the myths and

stereotypes normally associated with Seattle and the Pacific Northwest. My claim, in particular, is that *Black Hole* radically overthrows the cultural myths that after the 1960s branded Seattle and the surrounding region as the ecological American utopia, the “Ecotopia” that has lived on in American popular imagination for the following decades.

⁵ The Pacific Northwestern literary tradition, indeed, has repeatedly insisted on natural landscapes as the unique “local” topic to address, whether as the serene idyll celebrated by nineteenth-century authors (such as Theodore Winthrop or Joaquin Miller), or as the harsh and hostile enemy that loggers and lumberjacks had to fight against (as is the case with local writers such as Vardis Fisher, Roderick Haig-Brown, or even mainstream authors such as Ken Kesey, who set his masterpiece *Sometimes a Great Nation* among the loggers of the fictive town of Wakaonda, Oregon). Moreover, drawing on a too easily romanticized Native American tradition (as attested by a well-known speech supposedly pronounced by Chief Seattle in 1854, about the sanctity of the land), the Pacific Northwestern territory has often been celebrated for its archaic spirituality, as expressed, for instance, Gary Snyder’s poetry and its connection between ecology, ethics and mysticism (127). The so-called “Emerald city”, too, has grown popular as “a city in love with its Native American heritage... without [which], Seattle would somehow be less *Seattle*” (Thrush 3).

⁶ The dyad Northwest/wilderness, thus, has often been taken as self-evident and unquestionable, and Northwestern landscapes and the beauty of their nature have been praised in trite romantic stereotypes. A recent study of the Northwestern literary tradition insists that “[c]ontemporary Northwest literature addresses a wide range of topics, but the physical environment remains the dominant subject,” to the point of even including Raymond Carver among the writers who “have sought to find new ways of articulating what has become the primary theme in the region’s literature: the relation between people and this *diverse* and *mysterious* landscape” (O’Connell 141, my emphasis). The prominence given to nature in the Northwestern literary tradition (Gastil and Singer 6-9) has been so excessive that Matt Briggs, one of the most prolific contemporary Northwestern writers, has openly reacted against this convention and expressed the need to “explode the myth of Northwest writing only having to do with the great outdoors and rural scenes and wilderness survival and ranching and so on” (5).

⁷ *Black Hole* describes (and narrates) nature not as a placid and solemn idyll celebrated by ancient pioneers and modern environmentalists, or a simple concoction of mysterious and threatening presences, but as a cultural artifact that, especially in the Seattle-Tacoma region, has been profitably used to disguise the processes of urban expansion that have determined the social marginalization of specific categories of people. Burns’s choice is all the more noteworthy, then, since it does not simply criticize general assumptions about nature and its symbolic power, but overtly questions some of the myths that had been attached to the Seattle

area from the end of the 1960s to the 1990s, the period in which he chose to set his story. In an interview, Burns explains the reason for his choosing the 1970s as the frame for his narrative and mentions the residual “trappings of hippie culture” in order to address the lack of idealism typical of the 1970s (Appleford). However, idealism in 1970s Seattle was not limited to the legacy of hippie counterculture, but had acquired a highly elaborate ecological ethos. The best example of this tendency is the novel *Ecotopia*, published by Ernest Callenbach in 1975, which singles out the Pacific Northwest as the only area in the United States where people could be “lazy and carefree, contemptuous of the Protestant work ethic and dressed in handspun clothing” (Kling 230). In the novel, Callenbach imagined a new independent nation, including Northern California, Oregon and Washington, which in 1999 would become a kind of ecological heaven. Environmentalism, according to this perspective, would grant the inhabitants of Ecotopia wealth and stability. This dream-like place, however, was far from being a pleasant home for everyone: only white people were admitted in Ecotopia, and, since “the races cannot live in harmony” (Callenbach 99), black people were confined in city-states, like Oakland, to be possibly relocated to other, wider areas; Asian-Americans, too, were only allowed to live in Chinatown, San Francisco, and excluded from any other Ecotopian city (98).

⁸ In the twenty years that separate Callenbach’s novel from *Black Hole*, Seattle was deeply transformed in order, on the one hand, to live up to the ecological utopias of the 1970s, and, on the other, to meet the challenges of the more recent economic development and urban reconfiguration. These complex processes had finally resulted in the uncanny city that Burns describes in his graphic novel, which plainly shows what the supposed Ecotopia has actually become. Therefore, not only does *Black Hole* mark the distance between the environmentalist ideology that had animated the project of Ecotopia and the historical reality of 1990s Seattle, it also points out that the dream of ecology itself and its fetishizing nature and the landscape could turn into a nightmare.

⁹ Apparently, there is no strong opposition between *BlackHole*’s young protagonists and the majestic landscape that surrounds them. The first chapter, titled “Planet Xeno,” features a gradual and unexpected encounter between these people and nature, noticeable from the very arrangement of the panels on the two pages in which it takes place.ⁱⁱ The chapter opens on three boys smoking in the woods, one of them talking about the mysterious bug that is spreading among young people in Seattle. While the three guys go on talking, the captions at the top of each panel describe an enchanted place, Planet Xeno, “beautiful, [with] trees hanging overhead, white light filtering through the branches... a soft insulated green world.” In the last panel, the two distinct narrative lines merge together, and the fantasized planet Xeno becomes the place where “the weird shit started coming down.” By populating the natural areas where most of the story is set with threatening monsters, *Black*

Hole posits that the luxuriant woods of the state of Washington conceal disquieting secrets, and features the green areas surrounding Seattle as the place where marginalized groups have been confined. The enigmatic bug that sets the narrative in motion has, in fact, generated a category of social outcasts, formerly “normal” people who, once they become horribly disfigured, have no other choice than to lead their existence outside the sanctioned borders of society by moving to the woods. As the story unfolds, however, the closeness between the “exiled” monsters and the young people who defy parental authority and run away from home is increasingly noticeable. The symbolic and material boundaries between rebellious and non-conformist young people and the outcasts gradually blur, as demonstrated by the main narrative trajectory of the novel, involving teenagers from the city who choose to live among the marginalized. The main characters, Rob and Chris, though infected, bear its mark in areas of the body which can be easily covered, and thus can escape the fate of being cast out from mainstream society. Yet, they make friends with the stigmatized community of the woods and appreciate their helpful and kind attitude, which visibly contrasts with the selfish conformism they have left behind. Further foregrounding this opposition between sexual and social outcasts and perfectly integrated youth, the novel features a subplot in which young bohemian artist Eliza, who has grown a tail as an effect of the bug, is sexually harassed by her roommates, conformist and thus presumably “normal” young men (ch. 11).

¹⁰ Domesticity and middle-class suburban life are among the idealized sites of hope and happiness that *Black Hole* symbolically attacks, in a strategy that sounds all the more provocative since, when the novel was published, Seattle’s suburbs were enjoying a phase of rapid expansion and prosperity due to a process of gentrification that in the 1990s allowed them to grow (as regards both the residential and the commercial market) “more than twice as fast as did Seattle” (Dierwechter 157). On the contrary, *Black Hole* turns the rich suburbs of Seattle, where young people could enjoy a quiet household atmosphere, into sites of repression and violence, as is evident in one of the few scenes featuring adults: discovering that Chris has been skipping school and lying to them, her parents decide to keep her under closer control, showing no interest or respect for the real reasons prompting her behavior, but acting upon their own assumptions (“It’s some boy, isn’t it? Chris, you’re too young to throw your life away like this”; ch. 7). Furthermore, counterbalancing the numerous episodes set in the woods, cozy and comfortable houses host several of the most disquieting moments in the story: Keith, who embodies another typical example of American teenager, gives shelter to his monstrous friends who live in the woods by taking them to the house he is supposed to be looking after during its owners’ absence (ch. 10). In this very ordinary place one of them, David, carries out a massacre, killing most of his friends. The goriest scene in the novel, thus, is not set in the woods that surround the city but in the core of suburban domesticity.

¹¹ Through its critique of domestic suburban life, *Black Hole* therefore bears witness to the widening generational gap between the young protagonists and the adults. This clash is rendered through the text's rejection of any idealized notion of youth, which parallels the rejection of the romanticized conceptualization of nature and landscapes mentioned above. Both forms of idealization are critiqued when they mask less noble purposes, for instance insincerely praising youth as the only hope for the future, and deliberately overlooking social marginality, while celebrating the green areas that conceal it. On the contrary, by describing youth and nature as inherently contaminated (or, at least, contaminable), *Black Hole* unveils the artificial and ideological essence of juvenile and ecological rhetoric, both strategically used as means of political propaganda. Since the 1960s, Seattle had been celebrated in the popular culture as "the city of the future" and has embodied a sort of postmodern variant of the myth of the US as the land of opportunity,ⁱⁱⁱ thereby consolidating its appeal for the coming generations. However, in the 1970s, President Nixon and the Republican Party tried to co-opt the environmentalist movement in order to use it as a means to boost local companies in the state of Washington (especially in the Spokane area), and also to "outflank [their] Democratic political rivals" (Sanders 138).

¹² Countering the myth-creating discourse about the city, *BlackHole* explicitly validates the connection between marginality and territory, implying that there is a legitimate right to the small portion of land that the group of infected outcasts has decided to inhabit, and that this place is also symbolically associated with young people who rebel against their families and mainstream society. In chapter 9, while remembering the first night spent with her monstrous friends in the woods, Chris finally admits that she, too, belongs to this place: "I was finally where I *belonged* ... with a bunch of loser sick kids, down at the pit." By choosing to belong to this territory, Chris severs every connection with her family and her ordinary life in the suburbs (though she later regrets it), and adjusts her habits to those of social misfits.^{iv} As for the outcasts who welcome her in the woods, they show no fond attachment to the natural environment to which they have been confined, nor do they romanticize it, since they have not voluntarily moved there. Nevertheless, they do not betray any regret for their past life, nor are they envious of the people who live in the comfortable suburban houses. On the contrary, perfectly aware of the difficulties they have to face, they reveal a strong determination to build up a community, as can be inferred from the numerous passages that describe or imply mutual support as an essential trait of their daily life.

¹³ By focusing on the sense of communality that characterizes these outcasts in the forest, *Black Hole* calls for a reading in social and political terms, since the multifaceted exploitation (both in terms of economic as well as of symbolic capital) of natural areas in the Pacific Northwest and the gradual marginalization of their inhabitants are among the most significant transformations occurring in the states of Washington and Oregon during the decade in which *BlackHole's* twelve issues were

published. Moreover, establishing a connection between nature and marginality, the graphic novel foregrounds the problematic relationship between the white, middle-class population of the Northwest and those groups of people for whom the landscape was not an idealized place to be romanticized, but their primary, albeit precarious, means to earn a living. The period spanning the end of the 1980s and the 1990s was characterized by a struggle for control over the territory between environmentalists, local populations, public authorities, and industries. Its manifestations included: a controversy between environmentalists, fishermen, and Muckleshoot Indians over the right to fish the sockeye salmon (Klinge 244-245); the green activists' campaigning to protect the endangered spotted owl in the face of logging concerns; and the risk of the gradual impoverishment of the Northwestern forests due to the increasing export of timber overseas, which would in turn cause the destitution of the small communities of loggers living there. In the 1990s, the Pacific Northwestern non-urban and peripheral areas were experiencing a transition towards a poorer future, being gradually deprived of one of their most precious sources of income and stripped of their very identity, as a booklet issued in 1989 had alarmingly announced: "We are watching Northwest communities being logged into long term poverty for short term profits. We are watching the heart and soul clearcut out of the Northwest: our forests and our communities" (Osborn 1). Though not immediately identifiable with the actual inhabitants of the Northwestern woods, the outcasts featured in *BlackHole* experience a social marginalization reminiscent of that of Native Americans and the rural white working class, the two groups that claimed their right to use the land and exploit natural resources and met stiff resistance from the environmentalists, on the one hand, and urban expansion of municipalities, on the other.

¹⁴No mediation, thus, seems to be possible between the civilized urban reality and the impenetrable world hidden in the forests. The outcasts in *Black Hole* have become accustomed to living in the woods, only occasionally going back to the city that has banned them. A few characters, Rob, Chris and Keith, are chosen as mediators between the two worlds, since the hidden nature of their deformity allows them to pass as uninfected, but their attempt to simultaneously belong to the woods and to the city turns out to be unsuccessful. Rob is killed by one of the disfigured creatures of the woods; after his disappearance, Chris decides to leave the place where she has been living, and the book's last panel portrays her plunging into the sea, a likely suicide. Keith sets off to the South with Eliza, the bare, rocky landscape of New Mexico replacing the thick and overwhelming woods of the state of Washington. In *Black Hole*'s tragic ending, likened by one critic to the "school shootings that became a mainstream media concern in the United States with the events at Columbine High School" (Zeigler), the monstrous creatures of the woods are finally killed (in ch. 10 and 11) by David, a member of their own community, which implies that there is no hope for survival or future integration for those people who have been marginalized and relegated to

the limits of the urban world. In one of the final episodes of the novel (ch. 11), David is buying some fast food, and his presence disturbs the cashier and one of the customers, an athletic, good-looking young man who violently tells him to go away. The fight between the two ends with an emblematic scene: after hitting the young man's forehead with his gun, David spits in his mouth, adding: "Now you're one of us." The meaning of his "us" is made clear in the next panel, in which David addresses the young man's girlfriend, who cries and implores him to go away. His reply expresses the state of privation and poverty that people living in the woods have to face, as opposed to the quiet life of an ordinary young (white) couple: "You're crying for this guy? Maybe I should take you out to the woods for a few days. I could really give you something to cry about." The woods are implicitly defined as a place that can no longer be romanticized, and the life conditions of those who are confined there are, on the contrary, "something to cry about."

¹⁵*Black Hole* does not only refer to the transformations in the relation between the environment and the people in the whole Pacific Northwest, but, more specifically, also sheds light on the reconfiguration of the city of Seattle from the 1970s onward, as it implicitly refers to its urban sprawl and the gradual incorporation of natural areas within its boundaries. In the 1980s, Seattle's economic growth had determined a relocation of the well-off population from both the downtown and the distant rural areas to the suburbs (Schwantes 514); moreover, its urban pattern increasingly followed the paradigm of "integral accessibility" (Stanilov 792-3), defined by the "ease with which any given location is reachable from any other point in the region" (788). This meant an apparently well-functioning urban structure, but also entailed the lack of any hierarchical principle organizing the experience of space. Such transformations are rendered by Burns through the absence of any order and directionality in the areas represented in the book. The perennial wandering of *BlackHole's* teen protagonists, indeed, cannot only be explained as a metaphor for teen anxiety, but also evokes that absence of any ordering principle and/or systematic arrangement of neighborhoods and urban areas that accompanied the transformation of Seattle's urban texture from as early as the late 1960s. *BlackHole's* characters move unceasingly from one area of the city, and from one single-family building, to another, each house randomly placed according to a rhizomatic pattern without any visible center. The whole Seattle area, which also includes the green spaces gradually absorbed by the urban sprawl, is thus represented as a labyrinth, suffocating and disorienting. Though certainly not characteristic of Seattle only, the impact of the new pattern of the city on its overall image was here stronger than elsewhere, because of the emphasis on sustainability that had accompanied its urban and metropolitan growth over the time span between the years in which *Black Hole* is set and the years of its publication. To visibly mark the difference between Seattle's urban areas and its outside, Burns chooses to use different combinations of black and white within the panels, according to the place in which each scene is set: whereas the book as a whole

features a pervasive presence of very dark and black backgrounds, every time the protagonists of the story move outside Seattle, the color of the landscape immediately goes white. This happens in the scenes in which Keith and Eliza relocate to the Southwest, but also when Rob and Chris go to Emerton, only a few miles away from Seattle, across from the Central Basin, and spend a night together (ch. 7): the sky clears up as their car reaches the beach, and the graphic feature of the following pages visibly contrasts with the rest of the book, because of both the prevalent presence of white and the thinner contours used to portray people and landscapes.

¹⁶ By redefining the relationship between natural and urban settings, *BlackHole* effectively renders Seattle's spatial transformation from the 1970s on. Moreover, it points out the downsides of Seattle's urban development between the late 1960s and the 1990s, and of the ecological utopia that, during those years, had found in Seattle and in the Pacific Northwest its ideal setting. For these reasons, *Black Hole* can be read as an attempt to denounce the backlashes of Seattle's uncontrolled growth in the late 1980s, despite its reputation as the city in which urbanism and nature were supposed to harmoniously coexist: the homeless crisis, the increasing crime rates, and the shortage of affordable housing, subtly evoked in the gloomy scenes portrayed by Burns, were in fact among the problems that Seattleites faced at the end of the Reagan era (Sanders 218-219). The media, on the contrary, portrayed Seattle and the Pacific Northwest, respectively, as "the boom city of the 1990s" (Watrus and Haavig 112; "Stereotype-Less in Seattle"), in which the ecological utopia of the end of the century was taking place, and as the cradle of a new counterculture, that area of the US where institutions like the Evergreen State College (the "Santa Cruz of the '90s"; Bell 45) still supported a model of education based on radical and anti-hierarchic principles.^v

¹⁷ By featuring those young people who were constantly moved by the desire to leave their family homes, and by hinting at others who were excluded from the putative paradise of the Pacific Northwest, *Black Hole* shows how even a supposedly "ideal" region can be as equally oppressive as any other area of the States. The tension between those who fully embrace the changes taking place in the area, and those who constantly wish to escape a place that marginalizes them, is explicitly addressed in the passage in which Keith is rebuked by his better integrated friends: "You always want to be somewhere else!" (ch. 6), as well as Keith and Eliza's final relocation in the Southwest, which is emphasized in visual terms, the few panels set in New Mexico being almost integrally colored in white, thus sharply contrasting with the total black in which the scenes set in Seattle (landscapes, buildings, and also people) are inked.

¹⁸ By simultaneously describing Seattle's suburbs as suffocating the aspirations and dreams of its young protagonists, and critically addressing the rhetoric of wilderness as the most essential trait of Pacific Northwestern culture, *Black Hole* ends up questioning the very notion of

nature as a biological datum and as a symbolic repository of positive values as opposed to urban corruption and conformism. Therefore, it shows how monstrous and threatening nature can be, and, above all, that urban and natural landscapes are, rather than opposites, different aspects of the same (eco)system. The urban transformations of the 1970s, when Seattle started gradually assimilating natural areas within its outskirts, blurred the supposedly rigid divide between urban and natural areas (Stanilov 790); for this reason, Burns finally reveals that the “wilderness” featured in most of the book, when laid bare, simply amounts to the green areas incorporated within Seattle’s urban sprawl. When Keith leaves the house where his friends watch the same TV show his parents were watching and starts roaming the city, he goes to the woods, because “[i]t seemed like the woods would be better... they were natural. Natural things would make more sense.” Yet, in a natural and uncontaminated area, he experiences a nightmarish hallucination: the soil under his feet turns into something soft, a membrane where he floats, and a big hole opens up in the sky. Afterwards, the landscape gradually becomes more threatening and uncanny: a voodoo doll hangs from a bush and a young man, naked and gagged, is tied to a tree; severed limbs litter the ground. Frightened by what he sees, and, at the same time, unable to find a way out, he ends up with a group of outcasts who, sitting around a bonfire, invite him to join them. Not only does this passage confirm that the supposed monsters of *Black Hole* can provide a household sometimes warmer and more comfortable than the actual houses in the suburbs; it portrays a recognizable location for the woods that surround the city—Ravenna Park, one of Seattle’s numerous city parks, which turns out to be *within* the city itself, rather than somewhere in the deep wilderness, as readers may expect. What has passed for the wilderness proves to be but a mere segment of Seattle’s urban texture.

¹⁹To sum up, the stories and the bodies of *BlackHole*’s young protagonists deconstruct the rhetoric of nature and wilderness as an essential component of Pacific Northwestern culture and imagination, and also discard those commonplaces that idealize youth as a symbolic site of innocence, hopefulness and confidence in the future. The equivalence between youth and nature as constructions to be assaulted and scrutinized is crucial to the understanding of the relationship between the Pacific Northwestern countercultural scene of the 1990s and the popular sites of ideological projection it criticized. *Black Hole* blends together the fantasies about youth and nature, showing their artificiality, and ultimately demystifies their ostensibly romanticized imagery.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Appleford, Steve. "Interview with Charles Burns." *Los Angeles City Beat*. 14 Feb 2006. 20 Dec 2013. Web.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20070415221924/http://www.lacitybeat.com/article.php?id=3322&IssueNum=141>

Arnold, Andrew D. "A Trip through a 'Black Hole'." *Time*. 21 Oct 2005. 20 Dec 2013. Web. <http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1121476,00.html>

Bell, Thomas L. "Why Seattle? An Examination of an Alternative Rock Culture Heart." *Journal of Cultural Geography* 18.1 (1998): 35-47. Print.

Briggs, Matt. "Raven Chronicles' Urban Issue Leads Needed." *The Raven Chronicles* 8.2 (1999): 5. Print.

Burns, Charles. *Black Hole*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2005. Print.

Callenbach, Ernest. *Ecotopia*. Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2004. Print.

Dierwechter, Yonn. *Urban Growth Management and Its Discontents: Promises, Practices, and Geopolitics in U.S. City-Regions*. Houndsmill and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print.

Gastil, Raymond D., and Barnett Singer. *The Pacific Northwest: Growth of a Regional Identity*. Jefferson and London: McFarland, 2010.

Klinge, Matthew. *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2007. Print.

O'Connell, Nicholas. *On Sacred Ground: The Spirit of Place in Pacific Northwest Literature*. Seattle and London: U of Washington P, 2003. Print.

Ortner, Sherry B. "Generation X: Anthropology in a Media-Saturated World." *Cultural Anthropology* 13.3 (1998): 414-440. Print.

Osborn, John. "Logging the Northwest into Poverty: Exporting Logs, Jobs, and the Future of Communities." *Transitions: Inland Empire Public Lands Council*. December (1989): 1. Print.

Raney, Vanessa. "Review of Charles Burns' *Black Hole*." *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* 2.1 (2005). 20 Dec 2013. Web.

http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v2_1/reviews/raney.shtml

Sanders, Jeffrey Craig. *Seattle and the Roots of Urban Sustainability: Inventing Ecotopia*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2010. Print.

Schwantes, Carlos Arnaldo. *The Pacific Northwest: An Interpretive History*. Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 1989, 1996. Print.

Schwartz, Ben. "Gross Anatomy. A Sexually Transmitted Plague Turns Teens into Monster." *The Washington Post*. 30 Oct 2005. 20 Dec 2013. Web.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2005/10/27/AR2005102701793.html>

Snyder, Gary. *The Practice of the Wild*. San Francisco: North Point, 1990. Print.

Stanilov, Kiril. "Accessibility and Land Use: The Case of Seattle 1960-1990." *Regional Studies* 37.8 (2003): 783-794. Print.

"Stereotype-Less in Seattle: The Appeal of the Pacific Northwest Stems from Its Unpredictability." *The Harvard Crimson*. 9 Aug 1996. 20 Dec 2013. Web.

<http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1996/8/9/stereotype-less-in-seattle-pbsbmack-dab-in/>

Thrush, Coll. *Native Seattle: Histories from the Crossing-Over Place*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 2007. Print.

Watrus, Bob, and Jodi Haavig. "Seattle's Best Practices in the 1990s: Municipal-Led Economic and Workforce Development." *Economic Development in American Cities. The Pursuit of an Equity Agenda*. Ed. Michael I. J. Bennett and Robert P. Giloth. Albany: State U of New York P, 2007. 111-131. Print.

Zeigler, James. "Too Cruel: The Diseased Teens and Mean Bodies of Charles Burns's *Black Hole*." *Scan Journal* 5.2 (2008). 20 Dec 2013. Web.

http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/print.php?journal_id=120&j_id=14

NOTES

- i. I refer to the notion of "Generation X" as summarized by Sherry B. Ortner, whose analysis points out a set of specific characteristics of 1990s teenagers that could properly fit *Black Hole*'s protagonists as well: they were experiencing the shrinking job market and the burst of McJobs, the problem of racial blindness, the issues of identity and of sexuality in the aftermath of the AIDS crisis, the "problem of the slacker" (Ortner 420, 421, 432).
- ii. Since neither pages nor chapters in the volume edition are numbered, I will refer to the passages mentioned and/or quoted by the number of each issue, which corresponds to a chapter in the volume.
- iii. A famous 1969 song by Perry Como praised Seattle as the most welcoming place for whoever was "full of hopes an' full of fears... full of dreams to last the years, in Seattle."
- iv. Before dying, Chris renounces any form of domestic happiness by turning down the invitation from a lady who, noticing her lying alone on the beach, asks her to join them (presumably her family) for dinner (ch. 12).
- v. Many people started fleeing to Washington State and to Seattle (Schwantes 511), and many former social and civil rights activists moved there from California (Kling 230-231; Schwantes 512). Seattle, a sort of San Francisco of the 1990s (Gastil and Singer 7), was soon to become an interesting kaleidoscope of independent artists and grassroots movements.

ABSTRACTS

This essay focuses on Charles Burns's *Black Hole*, a graphic novel, published in 2005 and set in the Seattle suburbs, which undermines the cultural myths that, during the time between the late 1960s and the 1990s, have been related (often uncritically) to the Pacific Northwest. *Black Hole* positions itself among the texts that reshaped Northwestern culture in the 1990s, and addresses the social and urban changes that, over two decades, have affected the whole area in which its

story is set. In so doing, it debunks both the myth of the Pacific Northwest as the American “Ecotopia,” and, by featuring adolescents as protagonists, common stereotypes associated to youth.

INDEX

Keywords: Pacific Northwest, Seattle, social marginality, urban sprawl, wilderness, youth culture

Mots-clés: Charles Burns

AUTHOR

FIorenzo IULIANO

University of Cagliari